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THE POLYPHONY OF THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT

Sisir Kumar Das

Forum for Śaṅkaradeva Studies
Guwahati
1998

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Between 1994 and 97, Professor Sisir Kumar Das gave two lectures in Guwahati at the invitation of the Forum For Śaṅkaradeva Studies, the first being the Professor Banikanta Kakati Centenary Lecture entitled 'The Polyphony of the Bhakti Movement' and the second the Professor Maheswar Neog Memorial Lecture on 'Aṅkīyā Nāṭ and the Medieval Indian Theatre'. These two lectures, together with a slightly modified version of an earlier essay by Professor Das which appeared in the Jadavpur Journal of Comparative Literature No. 23, 1985 constitute the present book which is being released to mark the beginning of the 550th anniversary of Śaṅkaradeva's birth.

Pradip Jyoti Mahanta
General Secretary
Forum for Śaṅkaradeva Studies

Guwahati,
September 1, 1998

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সৱাতো অধিক তুমি মোৰ প্ৰিয়তম।
নাহি আন বান্ধৱ উদ্ধৱ তুমি সম ।।
ভকতেসে মোৰ হৃদি জানিবা নিশ্চয়।
ভকতজনৰ জানা আমিসি হৃদয়।।

(You are my dearest
There no other friend like you, Uddhav,
Know for certain that the bhakta
is my soul
and I his.)

— Śaṅkaradeva
Kīrtanaghoṣā, 23,14

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The Polyphony of the Bhakti Movement*

It is a great honour to be invited by the Forum for Sankaradeva Studies to deliver a lecture as a part of its celebration of the birth centenary of Professor Banikanta Kakati. Professor Kakati is known outside the Assamese speaking area mainly through his erudite work, his magnum opus, *Assamese : Its Formation and Development* (1941), published more than fifty years ago though written even one decade earlier. This comprehensive and fine study of the Assamese language is a significant contribution to the Indo-Aryan historical linguistics. Despite great changes in methods and techniques, and conceptual frameworks in language studies during the last six decades or so, this work stands as a monument of scholarship. Apart from its value as a piece of scholarship, the work played a great role in the making of the linguistic identity of the Assamese community. The intellectual interests of Professor Kakati

*Delivered as Professor Banikanta Kakati Centenary Lecture at Guwahati in 1994

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went beyond the immediate boundaries of philological studies. Through systematic studies of various myths and legends and religious cults of Assam he drew the attention of the scholarly-world to the importance of the relation between the study of language and the larger issues of cultural history and thus enlarging the vision of our academia. I join you in paying homage to an illustrious scholar, a dedicated teacher and a noble man.

I

I have been asked to speak on a topic befitting the objectives of the Forum for Sankaradeva Studies, which are, I understand, the contributions of Sankaradeva or the Vaishnava movement in Assam or in other parts of India in relation to one another. You are the inheritor and preserver of a tradition first given a serious direction and social purpose by Sankaradeva, the many-splendoured personality of medieval India. I know how deep and pervading is his impact on the cultural life of Assam, and how challenging he still is both as a historical person and a legend to the critics and creative writers. It will be presumptuous on my part to speak on such a personality with any authority, nor is it possible for me to add any new information to the body of Sankaradeva literature that include erudite works like Banikanta Kakati's *The Life and Teachings of Sankar Dev* (1922), Maheswar Neog's *Śaṅkaradeva and His Times* (1965), Satyendra Nath Sarma's *The Neo-Vaiṣṇavite Movement and the Satra Institution of Assam* (1966) and Hiren Gohain's *Asamīyā Jātīya Jīvanat Mahāpuruṣīyā*

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Parampara (1987), to mention a few only. I propose to share some of my thoughts, still tentative and ill-formed, about the nature of the so-called Bhakti Movement, to the growth of which Sankaradeva's contribution is both spectacular and unique.

Scholars have produced a large body of literature on the various aspects of the personality of Sankaradeva and the movement initiated by him. The medieval India has witnessed a series of movements sustained by a rare intellectual vigour and wide participation of the common people responding to the new articles of faith and creating pressure towards a restructuring of the ideological foundations of our social and religious life. All these movements were widespread, emanating from the grass root, and most of them maintained a close relation with the common man's aspiration, all of them affected the life of the people in a very meaningful manner giving powerful expression to the voices of the people living under an oppressive social structure and religious authority. What is most interesting is the continuity as well as the simultaneity of these movements, particularly in the northern India. Although it emerged in the sixth or seventh century and the Alwars and the Nayanmars were canonized centuries before *Bhakti* lashed north India like a mountain-storm, the Tamil *Bhakti* was not very well known in the north till the sixteenth century, which happens to be the peak period of the Bhakti movement. Its continuity and spread in a country so varied and diverse, and politically fragmented, is extremely amazing, particularly when one thinks of so many remarkable figures, saints, poets, musicians,

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theologians, scholars and leaders of men that emerged almost in an unending procession throughout the medieval period. In no other period of our cultural history so many figures from the lower-strata of the society were empowered in such a manner to assert against the Brahmanical authority.

The movement, however, was not monolithic, but conspicuous by its plurality. It was not dominated by the underprivileged alone, nor was it a movement entirely heretical in nature; it was a movement in which various forces, both conservative and radical, authoritarian and protesting, coexisted. But all the leaders, irrespective of their lineage and social connections, made significant effect on the life of the common man in varying degrees, for their concerns about religious institutions and the basic existential problems. Despite limitations and contradictions in their life and action, they remain a source of hope and courage and comfort to the millions. Even among these giants of men, Sankaradeva stands apart if only because of his versatility : a poet, a musician, a dramatist and of course a scholar. If popular memory is dependable he was also an admirable producer-director of plays and stage decorator. Ramacharan Thakur informs how Sankaradeva painted the scenes on the 'paṭa', trained dancers, made masks and prepared stage accessories suited to the divine characters. It is understandable why a discriminating critic like Professor Hiren Gohain writes

শংকৰী আচাৰ অনুষ্ঠান ধৰ্ম-কৰ্ম যদি ক্ৰমে ক্ষীণ হৈ আহি লুপ্তও হব লগা হয়, তথাপি সাহিত্যৰ জৰিয়তে তেওঁৰ প্ৰতিভা অসমীয়া জাতি থাকে মানে পৃথিবীৰ বুকুত জাতিষ্কাৰ হৈ থাকিব।

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II

Most of the movements, if not all, that are considered parts of medieval *Bhakti*, have both linguistic and geographical dimensions, though not always in full conformity with the linguistic-regional communities of our times. The history of the movements, therefore, apart from being configurations of various philosophical systems, is also a part of the development of communities identified by language and geography. The process of community formation was quite complex and it had involvement with other socio-political factors.

It is possible to have different histories of these movements, one preserved in the hagiographic traditions partly recorded and partly preserved in the memory of the people which can be called the insider's view of the movement; they are the records of the faithful. The other history is also an internal history, though not the narrative of the faithful; it is the history of the reception of the teachings of the leaders of the particular movement : the response to the Saint, real and imaginary, to his thought and activities, to the institution he created. The lives of all the medieval saints, not only of Sankaradeva, in general cannot be probably appreciated without relating them to the languages of different regions and also with the different interpretations of texts given by them.

The Bhakti movement is not only the story of the power-struggle amongst different sects and tensions between the dominant elite religion and the emerging folk

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religion, not only the story of the shift of political patronage from one sect to another, but also the story of the development of languages, a restructuring of the linguistic activity, a continuous tension between the language of the power-elite and the language of the people; a story of the growth of new literary canons and poetics to legitimize the emergence of new literary genres. The linear chronological model of Bhakti movement which has a popular acceptance tends to explain *Bhakti* as a growth from canonized texts, *Gītā* or *Bhāgavata Purāṇā*, either as their direct offspring or as a configuration with new significance, is not adequate to comprehend the complexities of the movement. It is not to deny the usefulness of the chronology and the relationship between the authoritative texts and popular movements. But what cannot be overlooked is that the history of the growth of the canonized texts themselves indicates processes of 'Sanskritization' of the folk texts and the allegorization of secular texts. The movements initiated by the Alwars and the Nayanmars are manifestations of a popular upsurge expressed in a popular language and conspicuous by its distinct modes of worship. The people who came together, travelled from one temple to another, worshipped a personal god without any mediation of priests, in their own languages, sang and danced in rapture. *Bhāgavata Purāṇā*, a work composed in Sanskrit in the tenth century, emerged out of the spiritual experience of about three centuries, as a part of the process of codification and Sanskritization. This itself is an evidence against the chronological development of *Bhakti* from Sanskrit to *Bhāṣā*, or from the restrained devotion of the Upanisadic texts into a popular emotional upsurge. The

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Tamil scholars and *bhaktas* created their own religious text : *Nālāyir Divya Pravandham,* an anthology of sacred songs, almost about the time the *Bhāgavata* was being composed. The *Bhāgavata* in its turn opened up new possibilities and indeed became the source of several religious movements each different from the other. The numerous commentaries, such as *Bhagavallīlā Cintāmaṇi, Rasa Mañjarī, Śuka Pakṣīya Pravodhinī, Tattva Dīpikā, Bhāva Prākāsika, Subodhinī, Bhāgavata Bhāvārtha Dīpikā,* which was used by Sankaradeva, *Bhāgavata Purāṇārka Prabhā, Vaiṣṇavatoṣiṇī* etc. are the evidences. The Saiva system of popular Bhakti movement represented by Nayanmars also created Tamil texts : *Tevāram, Periyā Purāṇam* and *Śaiva Siddhānta Śāstra.* Only later some of the *Śastras* were translated into Sanskrit, for example the *Śivajñanavodha* of Meykandadeva in the thirteenth century. The Virasaivas too, who created a body of sacred literature in Kannada, employed Sanskrit in their theological discourse at a later period in their history, as did the Gaudiya Vaishnavas in a grand manner. It only shows that the Bhakti movement while creating a space for popular spiritual aspirations also created new registers of expression in the popular languages, but it did not abandon Sanskrit altogether. It legitimized the popular by giving it the status of the sacred, and also did it transcreate the sacred texts (*Bhāgavata* in particular) in the languages of the people. It is true that in Kabir, one of the tallest figures of the Bhakti movement, one notices anti-Sanskritism, but it was directed more towards the value-system associated with Sanskrit than against the language itself. He found Sanskrit stagnant like the water of the well, while the *bhāṣā*, the speech of

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the people, flowing and free. His attitude towards Sanskrit is related to his own upbringing and education, caste and social commitment. Unlike Basavanna, Chaitanya, Tulsi or Narsi Mehta, all of whom were Brahmins, Kabir belonged to the lower strata of the society, like Kanakadasa, the Vaishnava poet of Karnataka whose initiation by Vyasa Ray created a furore among the Brahmins, or like Tukaram, or Dadu or Nambalwar, the great Tamil saint poet. But all of them gave new impetus to the *bhāṣā*, and none of them felt any problem within the existing linguistic hierarchy.

Many of the saints were polyglot, some of them were makers of new registers and creators of new idioms. Kabir who did not have any formal education wrote in several varieties of Hindi. *Ramaini* and *Sabads* in the *Vijak* are in Braj and Eastern Hindi, and *Sakhi* in 'Sadhukkari'. He employed the 'Sandhyā-bhāṣā' also. Guru Nanak, too, wrote in Punjabi and Khadiboli. He used the colloquial homely speech but made it adequate for the expression of concepts he got from the Upanisadic texts as well as the Islamic mysticism. To sum up, the leaders of the Bhakti movement either brought the Sanskritic world of religious thought near the people or elevated the *bhāṣā* to a higher level of expression.

To continue with the role of the medieval saints in creating new languages by investing in them new concepts and power, it may be pointed out that some of them also employed several arts —music and painting and dance—as means of communication of their distinctive religious ideologies. Many scholars have noticed a striking similarity between the techniques of propagation of ideas adopted by

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Martin Luther in his movement against the Roman Church and Sankaradeva in his fight against the reigning orthodoxy. "As in the case of Martin Luther", writes Birinchi Kumar Barua in his *History of Assamese Literature* (Delhi, 1975), "Sankaradeva's simple faith and democratic teachings were not liked by the Brahmins...", and to counteract the Brahmin offensives he employed "new methods of propagations", which included the establishment of *satra* and *nāmghar* for daily *nāma-kīrtana*. Hiren Gohain observes, "like Wycliffe and Luther the medieval saints also cultivated the language of the people" and "the parallels are too striking to be thought accidental."

The medieval Indian literature, unlike Sanskrit, was mainly directed towards the people, the large section of which was illiterate. The poets, therefore, adopted various media of transmission without depending on the written or the spoken words alone but what Marshall McLuhan calls the hybridization of media. All of them encouraged congregation : the Virasaivas had their *Śivānubhava Maṇḍapa*, Sankaradeva introduced *Nāmghar*, Chaitanya arranged *nagara- saṁkīrtana* and Jagannatha Das established *Bhāgavata - tuṅgī* (the place where *Bhāgavata* used to be recited) so that the religious texts could be read out to the people. Rāmalīlā, Krishnalīlā, Aṅkīyā nāṭ and several other theatre forms were also parts of this programme of mass-communication adopted by the medieval saints.

III

The commonalities among the various movements in different parts of the country during a long stretch of time are too well known to be stressed. Not only did the medieval

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saints share common anxieties about relation between different groups in the society, and express themselves in a language of remarkable similarity, not only did they pass through similar moments of intense religious experience, they had also confronted them with similar kinds of predicaments. Yet each one of them operated within a specific geographical area, used specific languages, appropriated local traditions in their own way and the movements which gathered momentum under their leadership acquired uniqueness, almost an autonomous character. To study these movements in isolation from one another, only as regional responses to dominant religious texts and traditions or only as expressions of a particular community distinct by language or geography can be misleading, but to treat the Bhakti movement as homogeneous and as a monolith would be even more misleading and incorrect, to say the least. In their anxiety to construct the Bhakti movement as a pan-Indian phenomenon the scholars have often presented it as a homogeneous and ideologically unified movement. As a result it has been conceived as a monolith, and the idea of a homogeneous Bhakti movement ignores the various tensions and contradictions and conflicts in its various stages of growth. In all probability the existing model of Bhakti movement is a nationalist construction, though certain attempts had been made even before to create a unified vision of *Bhakti*, by some of the early hagiographers. In the chapter entitled 'Bhakti Nārad Samāgam' of the *Padma-purāṇa*, for example, occurs a verse in the persona of *Bhakti*, mediating the route of her movement from Tamil Nadu, the land of her origin, to Vrindavan, the place of its

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"rehabilitation":

utpannā drāviḍe bhakti sāhaṃ vṛddhim karṇāṭake
sthitā kiñcinmahārāṣṭre gurjare jīrṇatām gatā
vṛndāvanaṃ punaḥ prāpya navīneva surūpinī
jātāhaṃ yuvatī samyak śreṣṭharūpā tu sāmpratam

Whosoever be its author, the verse is an attempt to construct the history of the movement of *bhakti*, if not the Bhakti movement itself, involving five distinct linguistic and cultural zones of India - Tamilnadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Gujarat and the holyland Vrindavana. The temporal movement of *bhakti* is linked with the transcendental by the indeclinable *punaḥ* (again) with reference to Vrindavana, where history merges into the divine space. In this scheme of things Vrindavana is not the terminal point of the movement, but the focal point, the centre where *bhakti* returns in its human-historical form, in conformation with the cyclical view of time controlled by God. Despite this attempt and several other attempts of this kind in the hagiographical tradition suggesting a homogeneity of the movement, the multiple trends of bhakti, sometimes even within one region and one language-community, are too strong and vigorous to be ignored. The *saguṇa* and the *nirguṇa* modes of worship have been fortunately accommodated within the Indian religious life without much conflict, but the tensions generated by the concepts of different god-heads have not been resolved so easily.

The Saivas and the Vaishnavas in Tamilnadu, for example, nourished strong reservations against one another

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culminating in fierce hostilities at times. A scholar of Bhakti has commented that the devotional poems of Sambandhar and Appar, the two major Saiva poets of Tamilnadu, are also effective instruments of *dharma yuddha* (religious war). Some traditions suggest that the greatest achievement of Sambandhar was to convert Sundar Pandyan, the Pandya King, into Saivism freeing him from the influence of the Jains. The hagiographical records indicate that the struggle between the Jains and the Saivas was not confined to religious debates or exhibition of magical powers to vindicate one's supremacy over the other, but it often resorted to physical force. S. N. Dasgupta in his *History of Indian Philosophy* (Vol. V. 1988, p. 45) mentions that the Chola king Koluttunga I, a Saiva, ordered the eyes of two Vaishnava disciples of Ramanuja to be pulled out, and the eyes of two disciples of Basava were put out by Vijjala, who got murdered by Basava's followers. Fortunately incidents of such atrocities in the history of Bhakti Movement are not many, but the hostilities among sects were continuous and intense. The Vaishnavacharya Ramanuja had to leave Srirangam because of the persecution of the Chola king. He could find himself safe only when he came to Deva Samudra (modern Halevid), the capital of Karnataka in 1098 where he converted the Jain King Ballalraj into Vaishnavism. The power equation between the dominating religious groups and their patrons on the one hand and the emerging dissident voices on the other is a fascinating feature of the Bhakti movement.

Sankaradeva's life provides a fine example of this power-equation. He waged a campaign against the Saktas,

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the dominant religious group of the time. He had invited the opposition of the Saktas by his vigorous rejection of the Tantric mode of worship and the magic and sexual perversion and human sacrifice associated with it. He also incurred the wrath of the Brahmins by his criticism of many Hindu rituals, and more particularly by his assertion of the spiritual equality of man. The trial that he had faced in the court of the Ahom king Suhummung is an indication of the collaboration of the vested interest with the ruling power against the forces of non-conformism. Professor Maheswar Neog informs that the Bhuyãs were always suspected by the Ahom kings and Sankaradeva had difficult times. The king indeed had once ordered for the arrest of the saint; Sankaradeva's son-in-law Hari was beheaded and his disciple Madhava was kept under detention for several months. Sankaradeva had to leave the Ahoms kingdom and settled in Barpeta.

Not all the saints of this period had to undergo similar political persecution but most of them had to negotiate with the dominant religious trends and potential powers patronizing them. And when one takes these factors into consideration, *bhakti* appears to be a heterogeneous and polyphonic movement.

To continue with this argument let me draw your attention to the different responses of the saints and their followers to the sacred texts. The most important text for the Vaishnavas of all denominations is the *Śrīmad Bhāgavata* which has been translated and transcreated into different languages, although its impact is different from area to area, or from language to language. The kind of

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impact that Bammer Potana, the fifteenth century Telugu poet, made all over Andhra Pradesh through his transcreation of the *Bhāgavata*, (along with the lyrics of Annamacharya) is partly comparable with the impact of Sankaradeva's *Bhāgavata* in Assam. Strangely, though there has been several translations of *Bhāgavata* in Bengali, none earned the popularity accorded to the transcreations of Potana, Sankaradeva or Ekanath or Jagannatha Das. The adaptations of the *Bhāgavata* in Gujarati and in Hindi, have followed rather a different course. In Gujarati, one mode of adaptation can be described as celebrations of certain episodes e.g. birth of Krishna, Krishna playing on the flute, Krishna's relation with Radha and so on, and these are represented in sequences of lyrics. The other mode, which is narrative, deals with certain major incidents in the life of Krishna. Hindi or, to be more specific, Braj, too, preferred this kind of adaptation, mainly in lyric sequences, rather than translating the whole text.

Vallabhacharya wrote *Subodhinī*, a commentary of *Bhāgavata* which he placed at par with the Upanishads and the *Brahmasūtra*. The sect established by him — *Pustimārga* — derives its inspiration from the tenth book of the *Bhāgavata* which was also translated by Nandadas into Hindi. Surdas, the greatest poet of this sect, used materials from the *Bhāgavata* for his lyrics. There is a tradition claiming *Sur Sāgar*, the collected poems of Sur, as a translation of the *Bhāgavata*. These facts only indicate how the Bhakti poets and scholars appropriated the text according to their spiritual and theological needs. While Narsi Mehta celebrates the erotic, Surdas celebrates the

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vātsalya and Sankaradeva the *dāsya*, each of them drawing sustenance from the same text.

Another text, though not as influential as the *Bhāgavata* but extremely significant in the history of the Vaishnava movement, Jayadeva's *Gītagovinda,* may be mentioned here. So strong is the resemblance between *Kriṣṇa līlā taraṅginī*, a Sanskrit work written by the late seventeenth century Andhra poet Narayana Tirtha and *Gītagovinda* of Jayadeva, that Narayana Tirtha is popularly believed to be the incarnation of Jayadeva. His lyrics used to be sung in the temples. But the two texts differ very significantly. Not only does Narayana Tirtha, a votary of *dāsya,* play down *Śṛṅgāra,* he also avoids Radha, the central figure of Jayadeva's poem. Similarly, Sankaradeva who appropriated many of the rhetorical devices of *Gītagovinda*, did not respond to the eroticism of the poem, nor to Radha. On the other hand this very text was valorized by Chaitanya and his followers, and even more strongly by the Oriya saints. "In no other state of India", writes the eminent Oriya poet-critic Mayadhar Mansingha, " has the influence of the *Gītagovinda* been so pervasive in art, society and literature as in Orissa." The *Gītagovinda* is sung every day in the temple of Jagannatha at Puri as part of the ceremonial worship.

To sum up, the Bhakti movement can be better understood if the monolithic and homogeneous model is replaced by a heterogeneous and polyphonic model. Bhakti spoke in multiple voices : it was a voice of radicalism, it was also a voice of conformism; there was a total rejection of Brahmanical codes, there was affirmation of Brahmanical

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codes: some sects wanted to create a limited space for women, some opposed it; some responded to Islamic mysticism, some failed to negotiate with it. Maheswar Neog, in one of his valuable addresses (*The Contribution of the Sankaradeva Movement to the Culture and Civilization of India, 1988*) sub-titles one of the sections "Sankaradeva introduces India to Assam". The Bhakti movement indeed introduced India to different regions, it also introduced the regions to India, a larger cultural space that could accommodate a multiplicity of thoughts and ideas. There is a continuous reorganization of the relation between the two: the region and India, the *Nadu* and *Desh*, in respect of language, myth, legends, philosophical ideas, music and other arts as well as various other mundane activities. The significance of the movement comes from this multiplicity on the one hand, and the continuous interaction between them on the other.

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Aṅkīyā Nāṭ and the Medieval Indian Theatre*

You have done me great honour by inviting me to deliver the second Professor Maheswar Neog Commemoration Lecture. I have accepted the invitation with great humility and reluctance. Professor Neog will be remembered by generations of scholars yet to come as one of the outstanding intellectuals of our time. His range and depth of scholarship is now a part of our intellectual history. But to those of us who knew him, he was more than a scholar. I remember him as an affectionate, charming and noble man and treasure the fond memories of my brief but delightful meetings with him. I mourn his loss which can never be compensated and share my grief with his wife and children. I also realise, as you all do, his spirit like a guiding star will shed tender and gentle light on the lives of all his friends and admirers. My address is a humble tribute to his memory.

*Delivered as Professor Maheswar Neog Commemoration Lecture at Guwahati in 1997

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I

Recent researches into the indigenous dramatic activities in the country have not only made us aware of the variety and opulence of theatre traditions that had existed in, and still exist in different parts of the country, but also have given us fresh insights into the history of formation of the drama in the medieval period, i.e. the period between the decline of Sanskrit drama around the eighth century and the rise of a new theatre and a new drama in the mid-nineteenth century.[1] The new-drama and the theatre were inspired, like our poetic and narrative literature, by Western models. The medieval traditions, however, did not die out altogether; they continued to exist in rural areas, free from the Western impact, in general, and among the groups of people who had both historical and emotional links with the ancient arts. These traditions, although rejected by the new dramatists and the new theatre-workers, had acted as subterranean forces regulating the structures of modern drama and the theatrical space.

The continuity of the medieval drama is discernible not only in the growth of the sub-genre of mythological or *paurāṇik* plays in almost all the languages of India in the nineteenth century, but more in the modes of representation involving the prioritization of music and the significance acquired by the role of the *Sūtradhār*, and his several interesting configurations in the characters of *Vidūṣaka*, fool, the mad man and *Viveka*, all interpreting and linking actions, rather than moulding them. My purpose, however, is not to demonstrate how the pre-British dramatic traditions played a significant role in the formation of the new-Indian

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drama, but to concentrate on some of the aspects, both thematic and genealogical, of the medieval drama in general and the *Aṅkīyā nāṭ* [2] in particular. I like to argue that medieval Indian drama is not an unimaginative continuation of the Sanskritic dramatic traditions, nor a byproduct of folk imagination and performances without any relation to the classical traditions of performing arts.

Following the categories of classifications of lexical items by the grammarians of the Prakrit languages, it is possible to characterize the medieval dramatic traditions as *tadbhava* and *deśī*, the former being the indigenous and the latter the indigenous and the folk. They did not flourish in complete isolation from one another. Though they had distinctive features as well as specific audience both of them interacted with one another. In the absence of written texts it is not possible to talk about the exact nature of the medieval drama, although certain conjectures can be made with some justifications. Like the medieval poetry and the narrative writings, the drama too, in whichever form it had existed, flourished within a religious framework. Be it *Kuṭiyaṭṭam* of Kerala, or the *līlā* plays of Mathura and Varanasi, the *Aṅkīyā Nāt* of Assam, *Yātrā* of Bengal and Orissa, to mention some of the forms of medieval theatre, it had a strong religious foundation. In this respect medieval Indian theatre had a remarkable affinity with Greek tragedies which evolved out of religious activities, particularly with the festival of Dionosyus. Greek tragedies, however, developed a space concentrating on the existential problems of man, Justice, Forgiveness, Duty, Political Loyalty, War, Sex and so on. The Indian drama on the other hand, in the medieval period, remained confined within a religious space alone. If there had been secular trends, in all probability they were in the folk theatre, the records are

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too insufficient to throw any light on them.

One of the reasons of non-availability of records of folk dramatic texts in particular, and folk literary texts in general, in the medieval period is the restricted use of the *bhāṣas*. It is true that the overall dominance of Sanskrit literary tradition had already declined by the end of the ninth and tenth century with the emergence of the *bhāṣās* as distinct literary speeches. Sanskrit, however, being the language of higher learning and religious texts of the Hindus, continued to remain as a hallowed language. Anything that was composed in the *bhāṣās* was, strictly speaking, a part of popular literature yet to acquire a respectable status in the eyes of the learned. Sanskrit was the only canonical and hegemonic literature. Literature of the educated Indians in the medieval period, therefore, was divided into two tiers, Sanskrit and the body of works composed in the *bhāṣās*. With gradual development of the *bhāṣās* and their employment to the propagation of Sanskritic religious literary texts, they had also developed a hierarchy within them. The relation between the two, however, was not oppositional, a few instances notwithstanding. There was a continuous process of Sanskritization on the one hand, and Prakritization on the other. The former means the engrafting of the elements of Sanskrit literature into the popular literature and the latter stands for processes involving transcreations of the classical epics and *purāṇas* into the *bhāṣas*, and of incorporations of various literary forms and structures of popular and folk literatures into Sanskrit. In course of time the *bhāṣa* literatures, too, had developed respectable and canonized

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literary traditions within them. We must not forget that by the end of the sixteenth century, several *bhāṣās* — Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Assamese, Oriya and so on— had developed a body of canonical literature, consisting of transcreation of Sanskrit epics and the *Bhāgavata*, and religious lyrics and hagiographies. There is hardly any reason to believe that the common people did not have a secular literature of their own reflecting a different world-view from that of religious literature. In all probability there was a vibrant oral literature in all language areas which flourished without the patronage of the royalty or the elite. Certain elements of that literature were appropriated by the written one, and certain other elements despised by the elite continued to exist through centuries, constantly changing and renewing themselves.

The instances of Sanskritization of the popular literature are too many, but I like to mention two texts only, both being extremely relevant to our understanding of the nature of the medieval Indian theatre. The first text is the *Bhāgavata*, a Sanskrit work composed around the tenth century in Tamilnadu. This remarkable religious and poetic narrative emerged out of a living experience of the emotional upsurge manifested in the lives of the Alwars, the god-intoxicated saints. "With the youthful Krishna at the centre", writes S. K. De, "the *Bhāgavata* weaves its peculiar theory and practice of intensely personal and passionate Bhakti, which is somewhat different from the speculative Bhakti of the *Bhagavad Gītā*."[3] It is a text written in the Sanskrit language, in the form of a *purāṇa*, but its speciality lies in the ingenuity of engrafting of various

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popular legends into its main body. The legends of the cowherd Krishna and his dalliances with the cow-maids have been made into a part of a sanctified religion; they are encoded with new signification, and a frenzied devotion of the Alwars, drowned in the love of god, became a part of a mythical world. This upward mobility, the movement of the popular towards the elite, of the folk towards the religious and, one might say, of the *bhāṣā* towards Sanskrit is the most important feature of this text.

Another influential text that also bears evidences of Sanskritization is the *Gīta-govinda* of Jayadeva which was composed about two centuries after the composition of the *Bhāgavata*. This poem, unique in Sanskrit literature by thematic innovations and metrical and riming patterns, has been often considered, not without justification, as Prakrit in spirit. This poem can be read as a fine instance of Sanskritization, a vernacular version being its pre-text or sub-text, or probably both.

II

The kind of relation that existed between the Sanskrit and the emerging *bhāṣā* tradition, as manifested in Sanskritization as well as in Prakritization in respect of narrative poems and lyrics, can be seen in the dramatic works as well. During the formative period of the modern Indian languages, i.e. between the ninth and the twelfth centuries, a large number of Sanskrit plays had been written. *Nāṭaka lakṣmaṇa ratnakoṣa* compiled by Sagara Nandi sometime before the fifteenth century provides a copious catalogue of plays written in Sanskrit. The themes of most

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of the plays mentioned here were derived from the epics and puranas, but some of them were of non-puranic origin.[4] Despite the large number of plays written in Sanskrit there is, however, little evidence of them being staged : play writing became a scholarly activity. The leaders of the religious sects and movements on the other hand did not fail to realise the potentiality of the vernacular, the *bhāṣās*, as well as of the non-canonized traditions of performing arts that existed in the society, in the propagation and the sustenance of their thought. These people, the leaders or writers, associated with different religious groups, created a new theatre.

Several scholars have tried to establish links between the medieval theatre dominated by dance and song, and the classical Sanskrit plays with an anxiety to demonstrate not only a continuity of the Sanskrit dramatic tradition but also to establish the underlying unity among the multiple performing traditions of the medieval period.[5] Norvin Hein[6], for example, demonstrates convincingly the line of growth of *Krishnalīlā*, particularly the *rāsa-līlā*, one of the favourite themes of the Vaishnava playwrights including Sankaradeva, using evidence from *Harivaṁśa* (II 21.25-28), *Viṣṇupurāṇa* (V. 13.24-29) and *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (X. 30.14). All the three texts record the events on that night of *rāsa* when the *Gopīs* "imitated" the deeds of Krishna after the manner of actors. *Harivaṁśa* says that "the daughters of the cowherds, formed in groups, sang the charming acts of Krishna's life (*Kṛṣṇa Caritam*) imitating Krishna līlā with Krishna's gait and manner (*kṛṣṇa līlānukārinyaḥ kṛṣṇa praṇihitekṣaṇa*). In the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*,

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Hein points out, not only has there been a repetition of the "enactment" of Krishna with greater elaboration but it also contains useful information about the manner of "acting" of the *gopīs* who imitate Krishna's action - his style of walking and singing.

duṣṭa kāliya tiṣthatra kṛṣṇoham iti cā parā
bāhum āsphoṭya kṛṣṇasyalīlāsarvasvam ādade (26)
Vile Kaliya, Halt there ! I am Krishna
Says another, slapping her arms in defiance and
undertook the whole of Krishna's *līlās*.

The dramatic quality of the passage is also enhanced by the dialogues put in the mouths of the gopīs. As the narrative proceeds, it further reveals the nature of the enactment : one of the gopīs performs the taming of Kāliya, another of the holding of Govardhana, yet another the slaying of Dhenuka.

This episode has been further expanded in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (X. 29-30). There are vivid descriptions of the enactment of Krishna's playing the flute, his punishment for theft, his slaying of the demons, Putana, Śakata, Tṛṇavarta, Vatsa, and Baka. These three texts, then, each one dealing more amply with the *rāsalīlā*, argues Hein, "express three stages of thinking within a tradition that has a certain unity. While developing the *Harivaṁśa* story the newer puranas follow a common line in deepening two tendencies, the placing of the plays in a time of separation[7] and the extending of the list of episodes which the gopīs are said to have enacted."

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These are evidences of the existence of a theatrical tradition based on the divine life of Krishna and of its phases of growth. Another interesting thing that emerges from these three texts is that the participants in the enactment are all women. It suggests the existence of a theatre exclusively for women as well.[8] There are several rituals, known as *Strī-ācār*, distinct from the *śāstrik* (scriptural) sanction, performed exclusively by women; there are vows (*vrata*) and ceremonies and songs and dances where male presence is totally forbidden. It is possible that *rāsa līlā*, in its embryonic form was a part of such customs and rituals to be performed exclusively by women. Only later did it become a part of the Vaishnava theatre.

This also suggests the Sanskritization of folk rituals — the *rasa* clearly evolves from a group dance in circular movements — and the allegorization of the secular and the profane. Like the *rāsa līlā*, many other forms of dance-dramas must have existed among religious groups or among the people in general, which had their origin in different festivals. The medieval theatre created a space for them. It became the main centre of entertainment : the traditions marginalized before, found respectability within it. The difference between the Sanskrit theatre and the medieval theatre, therefore, is radical: not only does the medieval theatre privilege the language of the people by rejecting Sanskrit, it also differs from the structure of the Sanskrit play in many ways. The primary medium of the Sanskrit play is prose, the primary medium of the medieval play is song and occasionally dance. Dialogues being more important than narration in the Sanskrit drama, the role of the narrator in it is decorative and probably only

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conventional. The narrative being extremely important in the medieval drama on the other hand, the role of narrator in the medieval drama is more effective and to some extent obligatory, as one notices in the plays of Sankaradeva.

The language of the people is the natural medium of the drama in every society. But the medieval Indian theatre did not reject Sanskrit altogether. It tried to maintain its links with the classical world through Sanskrit. The employment of Sanskrit along with the language of the people might have also been prompted by the motivation to give the emerging *tadbhava* drama the respectability of the *tatsama*. The *Aṅkīyā Nāṭs* employ both Sanskrit and Assamese. *Śrīkṛṣṇakīrtana*, the fifteenth century Bengali text, also uses Sanskrit as a link between different narrative and dramatic episodes; so does the Kuṭṭiyattam of Kerala, which is, however, a continuation of the classical Sanskrit theatre. Kulashekhara Varman (978-1036), the poet-ruler of Kerala, who brought about several innovations in the performing style of Sanskrit plays, used Malayalam only to interpret the Sanskrit *ślokas*.

The other important feature of the medieval drama that distinguishes it from the Sanskrit is, I think, the dominance of the narrative over the dramatic, and of the music over the language. All forms of literature in the medieval period shared certain features of performing art. Be it an epical composition or a ballad, not to speak of the lyric, it was presented in accompaniment with music or dance. The dramatic compositions, emerging out of this

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ambience, naturally depended heavily upon music and dance. As a result, one notices a continuous tension between the narrative and the lyric (as well as between the narrative of the *Sūtradhāra*, who is the prime actor, and the dialogues which required participation of actors), in the medieval plays (including the narrative poems constructed within a dramatic framework).

III

Let us look at a passage from *Śrīkṛṣṇakīrtana*, a text which has a strong and pervasive narrative component. It can be conjectured that the narrative parts in the text used to be recited by the *Sūtradhāra* (who is, of course, not mentioned in the text) with various facial and corporal gestures identifying the characters — Krishna, Radha and Badai — and imitating their distinctive features. What is specially interesting is the frequent use of dialogues among the characters as well. (It is interesting that despite the number of characters being three, never do all of them appear on the 'stage' at the same time). The dialogues naturally tend to eliminate the narrator; they at least curtailed the role of the narrator and created a space for the actors. The *Kāliya Damana Khaṇḍa* in *Śrīkṛṣṇakīrtana*, for example, hardly has any dialogue. It is narrated by the omniscient author, intervened by the lamentations of Radha and Nanda and Yashoda, thus presenting a proto-form of the drama of group lamentations or communal songs. But the next section *Yamunā Khaṇḍa*, contains a whole 'scene'

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dominated entirely by dialogues, almost the kind that the Greeks called 'stichomythia', i.e. dialogue in alternate lines of verse especially disputes.

Place : on the bank of Yamuna
Time : Evening (?)
Characters : Krishna and Radha [10]

কৃষ্ণ।। কাহার বহু তোঁ কাহার রাণী । কেনো যমুনাত তোলসি পানী।
রাধা।। বড়ার বহু মো বড়ার ঝী। আক্ষো পানি তুলী তোহ্মাত কী।
কৃষ্ণ।। কাখের কলস নাম্বাঅ তোহ্মে । কথা চারি পাঁচ কহিব আহ্মে ।
রাধা।। যার কান্ধ বসে দোসর মাথা । সেসি আহ্মা সমে কহিব কথা।
কৃষ্ণ।। তাম্বুল নেহ আইহনের রানী । তোর বচনে জীত্র চক্রপানী।
রাধা।। তাম্বুল দিহাঁ মোরে কি বোলসি। খুদ বড়সিএঁ রুহী বান্ধসী
কৃষ্ণ।। এহা যমুনাত মো আধিকারী । আহ্মার বচন সুন সুন্দরী।
রাধা।। তোর মোর আর বচন নাহীঁ। বুঝিল তোহ্মার মতী কাহাঞিঁ।
কৃষ্ণ।। সুদ্ধ সুবন্নের মোর কিঙ্কিনী। এহা নেহ মোর ধরহ বাণী।
রাধা।। গোয়ালিনী আহ্মে নহোঁ নাচনী। মোর কাজ নাহিঁ তোর কিঙ্কিনী।
কৃষ্ণ।। হের ষোল হাথ মোর পাটোল। এহা নেহ মোর ধরহ বোল।
রাধা।। সুদ্ধ সুবন্নের মোহব বাঁশী। এহা নেহ রাধা পাসত বসী।
রাধা।। তোর পাটোলের সুন কথা। সে মোহোর ঘৃতভাণ্ডের নাথা।
কৃষ্ণ।। মাথার মুকুট জলে রতনে। এহা নেহ রাধা রাখহ সমানে।
রাধা।। বাহিরেঁ ভিতরে তো কাহ্ন কাল। মুকুট ধুইয়াঁ আহুকিতেঁ ভাল।
কৃষ্ণ।। ডালিম সদৃশ তন তোহ্মারে। তাহাত মজিল মন আহ্মারে
রাধা।। মাহাকাল ফল আহ্মার তনে। দেখিতেঁ ভাল ভখিতেঁ মরণে। [11]

This is one of the rarest, and liveliest too, passages in the medieval literary texts whose dialogues have been employed so skilfully. Of course these lines were also sung as indicated by the names of the *rāga* and *tāla* in the text. But they provide a new space for language in the music-

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dominated theatre. The spectacle of a confrontation between the characters gets intensified through the exchange of words. The medieval drama, unlike the classical, operated within a religious space , which wanted to create a new form of enactment where music and dance could be employed in abundance. The heterogeneity of the medieval drama arose out of the relative importance given to those media by individual authors or groups. But what appears to be the most conspicuous in the medieval theatre is the importance it gave to the narrative (and consequently to the narrator) which created a tension within the dramatic texts.

I have just mentioned that the *Kāliya Daman Khaṇḍa* in *Śrīkṛṣṇakīrtana* is a straightforward narrative presented in a few sequences intervened by the lamentations of the well-wishers of Krishna, which provides ample space of songs. The narrative structure follows the tradition patterns of ballads.

বৃন্দাবন মাঝেঁ যমুনা নদী বহে।
তাহাত গম্ভীর আছএ কালীদহে।
কালীয় নাম নাগ তাহাত বসে।
জলে মাছ কুলে গাছ মৈল তার বিষে।
কোহ্লো জন্তু তাত না করএ জলপান।
তাহাত অধিক নাহি বিজন থান।।

The Yamuna flows through Brindaban
(and) there is a deep lake called Kalidaha
A serpent, Kaliya by name, lives there
Its poison causes death to all fish in it
and to the trees on banks.

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No animal drinks the water of that lake.
There is no other place lonelier than this.

The story line, which is very thin, can be summarized as follows:

Having decided to make it free from the snake's poison, Krishna plunges into the lake but becomes unconscious. When he does not rise from the water, his frightened playmates inform Radha and other milk women. They come near the lake and start lamenting. Nanda, Yashoda and Balaram also arrive at the place. Balaram recites the 'Daśāvatāra strotra' which brings Krishna back to consciousness. Then Krishna successfully fights with the snake and finally tames it. He rides on the hood of the snake and starts dancing. The alarmed wife of Kaliya begs mercy which Krishna grants generously. The snake is ordered to migrate to the South Sea. Then Krishna comes out of the lake. Every body feels happy. Krishna constructs a landing stair on the banks of the lake for the benefit of all. The lake then becomes completely safe.

Here is a story, a myth, narrating the history of the lake and of the 'cause' of the construction of the landing steps, told with precision and without elaboration, except the lamentation songs which only intensify the human hope for divine intervention in their mundane existence. It is also a narrative of a divine mission. Let us compare this story with Sankaradeva's *Kāli Damana Yātrā*.

Sankaradeva's play, like the Bengali narrative, addresses an audience ready to witness a *līlā*, an enactment of God Himself to vindicate his divinity and to establish

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his absolute authority over the world. The play is only a re-enactment of a mythical history, an imitation of the divine play, *līlā*. Neither the *Sūtradhāra* nor the audience have any doubt about the divinity of Krishna. The *līlā* operates within this framework.

In this play Krishna performs two miracles, the taming of the monstrous snake and the controlling of a mighty forest-fire. The first act of the hero is Herculean in nature. It is an extraordinary feat, yet within the realm of possibility of the powerful human hero. The second act, that of controlling Nature, demands more than human strength and indeed the way Krishna controls the fire is supernatural, to say the least. Sankaradeva extends the action of the play beyond the surrender of Kaliya, and adds the episode of the forest-fire to provide the spectacle of the saviour at least twice.

There are seven important movements in the play. The first movement arises out of an immediate cause, unlike the resolution taken by Krishna in the Bengali narrative mentioned just now. Here the audience 'see' the shepherds assembling near the lake and dance. Then they drink water, without knowing that it is poisoned, and lose consciousness. This initiates the dramatic movement. Krishna enters the stage. He laments to see his friends lying unconscious, then he resuscitates them and finally assures them of future safety. The lament signifies god's proximity to man, the resuscitation signifies his role as healer, and his promise for the future a divine responsibility, a divine dispensation.

The next movement involves Krishna's dive into the

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lake. He swims defiantly inviting the monster in a combat which results in the defeat of Krishna. The next movement consists of lamentations of gopīs and gopas. Then comes the climax— Krishna charges the thousand-hooded reptile and vanquishes it decisively and rides on its hood and starts a *kautuk* dance. This particular episode is narrated by the *Sūtradhāra*. In all probability this sequence used to be mimed by the narrator culminating in an exhilarating dance.

The divine drama should have ended with this dance, or at least at that point of time when Krishna allows the vanquished to go to a distant land. The play, however, continues. The people of Braja who had assembled on the bank of the river, now in a mood to celebrate the great victory, decides to spend the night there. A fire breaks out at the dead of night in the forest engulfing the whole area, and threatens the lives of the villagers. In both the cases there is a suddenness with which the danger appears: the death of the shepherds in the beginning of the play and the unpredictable forest fire at the end. The rescue operation in the second case is more swift and prompt and also totally supernatural as if to match the severity and the enormity of the danger. Krishna "devours" the fire.[12]

The divinity of the hero is now established beyond doubt. The narrator proclaims the glory of Krishna and his supernatural power, in Sanskrit verse as well as in Assamese prose[13]. The enactment, to use a cinematic term, gets freezed for a moment, time becomes still and the present intervenes into the mythical time. Then, the action restarts,

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time returns to the past and then Krishna and all the milkmen and women with their cows start their journey towards Braj.

IV

The ingenuity of the plot-construction and the culmination of the action in a celebration that one notices in this play can be generalized as the distinguishing marks of the medieval play. This can be identified as a 'carnivalesque' element in the medieval theatre. I do not have the space to go into the details of the constructional features of the *Aṅkīyā Nāṭ*, but let me draw your attention to a few of them. One of these features may be called recurrence or reduplication or parallelism. Sankaradeva has employed this feature almost with a predictable regularity which gives a fullness to his plays. In *Kāliya Damana*, one notices that the hero demonstrates his power and valour twice. The common element in both the cases is the threat to human lives and God's protection of man. In the first case the danger is eliminated with heroism, in the second there is a complete annihilation of the forces of evil involving a miracle. But both the cases have the basic similarity of function.

Take the play *Rukmiṇī-Haraṇa*, where Krishna is presented as a romantic and chivalrous hero involved in a *haraṇa*. The abduction is more or less complete with the hero's victory over the kings including Sisupala. The victory is also celebrated with the meeting between the hero and the heroine, Rukmini. But there is a second combat, not against other aspirants of Rukmini's hand— a regular element in romantic poems on chivalry— but between

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Krishna and the power challenging his divine authority. When Krishna is about to kill Rukmi, the person who challenged him, Rukmini comes to his rescue, "You are the lord. That sinner is ignorant of your glory".[14] Krishna listens to the prayers of Rukmini, the bride and the devotee, spares his life but punishes him according to the existing penal codes[15]. The narrator assumes the role of the official herald asking people to watch the punishment of the rebel against God : আহে লোক দেখো দেখো যো হবিক দ্রোহ কবয়। হবিগুণ নাম লৈতে নিন্দা কবয়, সোহি পাপীক ওহি অবস্থা দেখহ। জানি হবি ভকতিক নিন্দা ছোড়। হবি বোল হবি বোল।[16]

The lover hero turns into a hero with royal authority. Once the divine mission of subjugation of the sinner is complete the hero reappears as a romantic lover. The play concludes with the marriage of the lovers, with elaborate rituals in the presence of men and gods.

This feature of duplication or parallelism can also be noticed in the characters of the beggar Surabhi and Haridasa. They have different names, they are located at different places, but they speak almost an identical language and their missions are the same. The representations of their meetings with the hero and the heroine respectively are constructed as mirror-image of one another.

Scholars have noticed certain similarities between this play and *Rāma Vijaya Nātaka*,[17] believed to be the last play of Sankaradeva, written and produced in 1568. Professor Maheswar Neog[18] points out that the garlanding of Rama by Sita immediately after breaking of the bow has its "prototype in his (i.e. Sankaradeva's) earlier drama *Rukmiṇī-Haraṇa* where Sisupala and others give tough fight

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to Krishna." The similarity, however, can be linked with the well-established conventions of epic and ballad traditions. What appears more significant is the structural similarity between the Rama-Parashurama combat in *Rāma Vijaya* and the Krishna -Rukmi duel in *Rukmiṇī Haraṇa* . In fact the Parashurama episode is a recurrence of and parallel to the Kaushika episode in *Rāma Vijaya*. The sages in both the plays signal danger: Dasharatha is terrified and loses consciousness when Kaushika wants Rama and Lakshmana to accompany him to the forest. Similarly, seeing Parashurama, Dasharatha falls down unconscious, and when he regains consciousness he implores piteously to spare Rama. In both the cases Rama is involved in a battle and in both he emerges victorious.

Similarly these is a reduplication or re-enactment of the marriage celebration in *Rāma Vijaya*. After Rama's triumph against the kings who came for Sita's *svayamvara*, Janaka arranges the marriage between Rama and his daughter. Dasharatha comes to attend the ceremony. So do the gods. The marriage-hall in Mithila that had turned into a battle-field, returns to its original state of joy and happiness. But Parashurama enters and the hero has to take arms again. The play, however, concludes not with a victory march in the streets of Mithila but in Ayodhya, the home of Rama, where the newly wed couple is welcomed by the queen mother and other women in the palace. *"Rāmaka aicana vivāha mahotsava sampūrṇa bhela,"* says the narrator — thus is completed the grand ceremony of Rama's marriage. And he invites the audience to the festivity that followed.

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This feature of reduplication is to be noticed in *Pārijāta-Haraṇa nāṭ* as well, although with slight deviations. Krishna fights twice in the play, once against Narakasura, who has become a threat to the security of the gods and Indra, and once more against Indra, the ungrateful king of gods who defies him. The play develops round two episodes, similar to one another, of jealousy, one between the two co-wives, Rukmini and Satyabhama, the other between two proud queens, Satyabhama and Sachi. The cause in both the cases is the desire to possess the celestial flower — *pārijāta*.

Patnī-Prasāda, believed to be the first play of Sankaradeva, has also this feature of reduplication and parallelism. Incidentally, this is a unique play if only because of its employment of boy actors,[19] a feature not to be seen in other Indian theatres. The play is conspicuous by the recurrence of the worship of Krishna, first by the women and later by men; the former is an act of spontaneous devotion, the latter an act of surrender. Here is also the element of subjugation and overpowering of his rivals by Krishna.

The play *Keli Gopāla*, about which I have not spoken so far also shares the feature of reduplication or recurrence employed as a device to establish the complete authority of the divine hero. The play has other interesting features too; this is the only play in medieval India that celebrates nature in all its beauty and charm.[20] Although the river and the forest provide location for *Kāliya Damana* and *Patnī Prasāda*, the geography hardly contributes to the intensification of the emotions displayed by the participants in these plays. In this play, on the other hand, nature

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occupies the key position. The season is autumn, the time a full moon night, the place a wood beside a river and the participants dainty cow-maids. The initial words *śaracchaśāṅka dyutiḥ komala* in Sanskrit and *śarat śaśī niśi* in Assamese both referring to the autumn night strike the key note of the play. Despite the idyllic surroundings and erotic associations, this play too follows the general pattern of heroic exploits in the plays of Sankaradeva. The appearance of the Yaksha, Shankhachuḍa, introduced as an adversary of Krishna, is an interesting innovation in the plot. The interruption of the dalliance of the *gopīs* by the Yaksha is brief as he is driven out by Krishna promptly. He comes back for the second time, and for the second time he is thrown out by Krishna. But he comes again, this time possessed by an uncontrollable carnal passion, and seizes one of the maidens and drags her away. The role of Krishna now turns from that of a tender lover to a saviour. He kills the Yaksha. The play, however, does not end with the death of the wicked and the re-establishment of the order. It continues till the completion of the game, the *līlā*, the celebration of the autumn night.

This brief analysis of the plots of the six *aṅkīya nāṭs* reveals a specific strategy of construction ensuring the maximization of the dramatic effect within the available space and poetics of the religious drama. It differs from the construction of the Sanskrit drama, not only by the continuous presence of the narrator throughout the play, but also in its employment of several media, song, dance and language in varying degrees. It is the play with the divine hero, either Krishna or Rama, with predictable victory over forces of disorder. It has representation of the

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evil, in the forms of tyrants, beasts or even natural power, but also of the restoration of the moral order by the complete elimination of the villain resulting in a celebration, the most important feature of the medieval theatre. When this theo-centric world was replaced by the anthropo-centric world in the later centuries, the new drama appeared with representations of the larger varieties of life and problems of mundane existence. Metaphorically speaking, the exit of God made the entrance of man in the centre-stage possible. The change in the hero brought a change in the closed-world of the medieval theatre, it challenged the rigidities of its inner structure, it replaced the predictability of the divine intervention in human life by the uncertainties of history.

Notes :

1. See Adya Rangacharya, *Indian Theatre*, NBT, New Delhi, 1971 and Kapila Vatsyayan, *Traditional Indian Theatre*, NBT, New Delhi,1980.

2. The literature on the subject is quite large and mostly available in the Assamese language. Among these works the most well known are S. N. Sarma, *Asamīyā Nāṭya Sāhitya*, Guwahati, 1962; B. Saikia, *Saṅkardevara Nāṭ āru Nāṭya Karma*, Souvenir of Srimanta Sankaradeva Sangha, Golaghat, 1995, Maheswar Neog, *Sankaradeva and His Times*, Gauhati University 1965; K.R. Medhi, *Studies in the Vaishnava Literature & Culture of Assam*, Asam Sahitya Sabha, Jorhat, 1978.

3. S. K. De, *Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Bengal* (1942)

4. See Sukumar Sen, *Bāṅglā Sāhityer Itihās*, Purbārdha, Vol I, 4th ed. Eastern Publication, Calcutta, 1963, P. 33.

5. *Aṅkiyā Nāṭs* in particular have been considered by several scholars as a continuity of Sanskrit drama. See Badan Chandra Saikia, 'On the Origin of the Assamese Drama,' *Prācya Prajñā*, Vol. I. 1996, Sankaradeva Institute of Culture, Guwahati, 1996.

6. Norvin Hein, *The Miracle Plays of Mathura*, OUP, Delhi, 1972. p. 258f

7. Hein Op. cit p 262. ' time of separation' needs an explanatory note. In *Harivamsa* the enactment took place in presence of Krishna, in the later purāṇas during his absence — anyadeśaṁ gate kṛṣṇa, (*Viṣṇupurāṇa* V. 13.24) 'when Krsna had gone to another place'. In *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, too, the enactment takes place when Krishna is not present.

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8. Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra* (3.3) mentions the existence of male and female theatre (*Puruṣa Prekṣa* and *Strī Prekṣa*). There are also evidences from *Manu Smṛti* (9:84), and *Nāṭya Śāstra* (20.140). An all - women-drama, *Lakṣmīnārāyaṇa* is said to be performed at the court of India, has been referred to in Kalidasa's *Vikramorvarśīya. Uttararāma Carita* mentions a dramatic presentation by the *apsarās*; the Kashmiri poet Damodara Gupta's *Kuttinimatam Kāvyam* gives a description of the presentation of the first act of Sri Harsha's *Ratnāvalī* by the *Ganikās* of Varanasi. For details see M. L. Varadpande, *Traditions of Indian Theatre*, Abhinav Publication, New Delhi, 1979, Chapter III.

9. One is reminded of Aristotle's observation on the growth in the number of actors in Greek tragedies, in addition to the Chorus leader. It was Aeschylus who introduced the second actor and curtailed the business of the Chorus and made dialogues more important. Sophocles introduced a third actor and scenary. *Poetics*, IV.

10. A rough English translation of the conversation is given below:

K. Whose daughter-in-law are you? Whose wife ? Why do you draw water from Yamuna ?

R. I belong to the house of Bada, I draw water, it's none of your business.

K. Keep your pitcher down, I like to talk to you.

R. How are you? How many heads have you got on your shoulder.

K. Take this *tambul*, Aihan's wife. I'm Chakrapani, yours words are so pleasant

R. Try to please me with *tambul* ? I'm too big a fish for your fishing rod.

K. I am a watchman on the Yamuna, listen to me, my fair lady.

R. I know your intentions well, we have nothing to talk.

K. Look at this armlet, made of pure gold, take it and listen to me.

R. I am a milkmaid, not a dancing girl. Do I care for that armlet?

K. Look at his piece of silk, sixteen cubit long, this is yours. And this is my flute, made of pure gold. Come, sit by me and take it.

R. What do I care for that flute of yours, I wont even stir milk with that. And that piece of silk! That is not even worth the rags to mop my butter-pots.

K. Look at my crown, dazzling with gems. Take it and be pleased.

R. Your body is dirty, your mind is dirty. That crown should be washed and thrown away.

K. Your breasts are like pomegranates, I'm charmed by them

R. Indeed they are like the fruits, whose sight is lovely and the taste is death.

11. The Bengali text is to be found in *Śrīkrishṇa Kīrtan*, ed. by Basanta Ranjan Ray, Bangiya Sahitya Parisat, Calcutta, 5th Ed. 1954, P. 95.

12 কৃষ্ণ : আহে গোপ গোপী সব, হামু বিদ্যমান থাকিতে কোন চিন্তা থিক ? নির্ভয়ে বহ

সূত্র : ওহি বোলি ঈশ্বর চেষ্টা দেখাই তৎকালে সে প্রচণ্ড বহ্নিক মুখে কয়ল। দুর্ঘোর বহ্নি মৈচে জল পবিত্র তৎকাল নির্বান গেল। তাহে পেখি গোপ গোপী সব জয়জয় কৃষ্ণ বোলি জোকার পারল।

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I have used the text edited by Birinchi Kumar Barua, *Aṅkīyā Nāṭ*, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies in Assam, Gauhati, 3rd ed. 1983. P. 20. The editions by Mahim Bora, *Śaṅkaradevar Nāṭ*, Asam Prakashan Parisad, Guwahati, 1989, use different spellings.

13 a শ্রীকৃষ্ণস্যাদ্ভুতং কর্ম দৃষ্ট্বা সর্বেহবিস্মিতা ঃ।

অন্যোন্যমিতি প্রত্যূচুর্ণ নবোনন্দনঃ।।

b আহে ভাই সব, দেখো দেখো ওহি নন্দ-নন্দন মানুষ নোহে। প্রচণ্ড বহ্নিক মুখে তৎকালে পান কয়ল। ওহি কি মনুষ্যক কাম? আঃ জানল জানল যে পুরুষ সনাতন নাবায়ণ। সে ভুমিক ভাব হবণ নিমিত্তে অবতাব হয়ে থিক।

Barua, op. cit. p. 20. Bora, op. cit. p. 130

14. 'তোহো পবম ঈশ্বব। ওহি পাপী তোহাক মহিমা নাহি জানল।' See Barua, op. cit. p. 94

15. The Sūtradhāra narrates elaborating the details of the punishment that involves tonsuring of the head, shaving of the beard and the eye brows, besmearing the face with black shoot etc.

16. Barua, op cit. p. 95., Bora, op. cit. p. 181.

17. For an abridged English translation of the play see Manomohan Ghosh, *Contribution to the History of the Hindu Drama. Its Origin, Development and Diffusion*, Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1958. Also included in *Essays on Sankaradeva* ed. by Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami, Forum for Sankaradeva Studies, Guwahati, 1996, Appendix-E.

18. Maheswar Neog, 'Literary Works of Sankaradeva', included in Ranjit Kumar Dev Goswami, ed. *Essays on Sankaradeva*, op. cit. p. 88.

19. Some of the plays of Madhavadeva, *Bhojana Vihāra Naṭ Coradharā Kotorā Khelowa* for example, are the other *Aṅkīya naṭs* to share this feature. The child found its place in Indian theatre only in the twentieth century after the publication of Rabindranath Tagore's *Śāradotsav* (1908)

20. Most of the plays, along with the *Aṅkīyā Nāṭs*, have a deep connection with different harvest festivals. In this respect they share some features of the medieval European plays. See Clynne Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre*, Cambridge University Press, 3rd. ed. 1987, Chap. IV (Drama and Nature).

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THE POET AND THE PEOPLE *

Although it is not wrong to describe medieval Indian literature as a religious literature, it can be misleading to a great extent. The description seems apt when one considers the fact that the literature written in different Indian languages in the medieval period is constituted of adaptations and transcreations of the Sanskrit epics, translations of religious texts like the *Gītā* and the *Bhāgavata*, and of course, of large quantity of poems written in praise of gods, some pan-Indian, some regional, under the direct inspiration of various religious sects that became dominant during this period. The dominance of religion over the poetic activities was so complete that one hardly finds the existence of any powerful stream of secular literature, with notable exceptions of some court poetry and folk ballads and songs. Even if we are doubtful about the validity of the distinctions between the sacred and the profane in Indian religious activities, the poets'

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overwhelming concern for religion may appear slightly intriguing.

Medieval Indian literature, unlike the classical Sanskrit, is a popular literature, a literature written in the regional languages, more or less in a familiar and intimate diction, and avowedly for the benefit of the people. It is natural to expect that a literature of that kind should not be confined exclusively to religious matters but reflect the mundane concerns of the people. Moreover there is no reason to believe that the medieval Indian poet inherited only a religious literary tradition. Despite the fact that the Brahmins and the Buddhists and the Jains had created a vast body of canonical literature, the ancient Indian literature produced in Sanskrit and Pali and in ancient Tamil was predominantly secular. During the declining days of Sanskrit court poetry there was no indication that all literary activities were destined to be submerged under religion. Religious literature was flowing side by side with the secular and it was but natural to expect that their identities would remain distinct in the following periods. Though the two great Sanskrit epics, often described as *itihāsa* (stories of the past), contain a lot of religious materials, they are primarily stories of human beings and of human problems, and in spite of occasional supernatural interventions in them, they remain secular works. Sanskrit court poetry, as well as the *aham* and *puram* poetry of the Sangam Tamil, breathe a spirit of joy and beauty and of mundane pleasure, not of the Hindu-Buddhist ideals of asceticism. Contrary to the Western view that asceticism is a dominant feature of ancient Indian poetry, the poets both

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in Sanskrit and in Tamil , present a strong and a passionate attraction for the material world. In his early work *Ṛtu Saṃhāra*, Kalidasa sings the praises of uninhibited joy and ecstasies of physical union and sensuousness of nature; and in his mature writings he never projects asceticism as the one and the only ideal of man, but a social order where everything in man's life finds its due. In fact, barring a few exceptions, ancient Indian literature is a secular literature. The phenomenal growth of a religious literature overshadowing the growth of all other types of literature in the medieval period, therefore, appears to be rather intriguing.

One may argue that since medieval Indian literature emerged and developed for the consumption of the common man, the medieval poet rejected the classical tradition lock, stock and barrel. Classical literature was meant for the elite, it was highly artificial and often excessively erotic, and rarely did it reflect the aspirations of the common man. The classical poet working under the constraints of elite patronage developed some special literary conventions and indulged in issues in conformity with the taste of his patron. Those conventions were hardly acceptable to the medieval poet for obvious reasons. But it is not true that he rejected the classical tradition altogether. Even the erotic poetry found a place of honour in medieval religious literature.

The classical poet borrowed various elements from contemporary life and drew material from the vast quarry of peoples' literature. This assumption, I hope, will not meet serious objections. Whatever the classical poet borrowed from peoples' literature was refined by him and

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was made a part of elite literature. The medieval poet, too, exploited the contemporary folk literature and refined the material he borrowed, but made it a part of a religious literature. In order to accommodate all types of literature within a religious literature he had to broaden its scope to such an extent that the distinctions between the religious and the secular became almost obliterated and often irrelevant. If one is still inclined to describe such a literature as religious, one must remember that it is not a literature that leaves out "what men consider their major passions", as T. S. Eliot once pointed out as the alleged limitation of religious poetry.

II

Any critical examination of a literature such as this must try to answer two important questions. Why did a particular group of poets at a certain point of time feel it necessary to express their artistic feelings through a religious framework and consequently, how did a religious framework serve the purpose of literary expression fully and effectively. The search for answers to these questions invariably leads a critic to the examination of the relation between literary and social forces even when he is not primarily interested in their interdependence.

Medieval Indian literature was a popular literature and the medieval Indian poet was committed to the creation of this types of literature. By popular literature I do not mean a sub-standard literature, a literature created primarily to entertain and amuse, or to gratify the baser instincts of man or to create a channel of escape to the world of fantasy

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from the harsh realities of life. By the term popular literature I mean a literature that emerges out of the total activities and the social and moral concerns of the people at large, a literature that tends to remain as close as possible to the people, and consequently whose value is judged and determined by its role in the life of the people. The medieval Indian poet tried to create — and he was more or less successful in this exercise — a literature of this kind. He created it partly be reorganizing certain traditions of this kind. He created it partly by reorganizing certain traditions of classical literature, and mainly through and entirely new experiment. And in both cases the immediate impulse came from the changes or attempted changes in the existing social fabric.

A group of poets, many of whom were educated Brahmins, translated or transcreated the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. Some of them translated the *Bhāgavata* and at least one of them wrote a commentary on the *Gītā*. The fact that some of the poets in this group were non-Brahmins (Sarala Dasa of Orissa, for example) strengthens the point I am about to make. The choice of the texts by these poets shows very clearly, though none of them expressed it explicitly, that they were intent upon creating a new literature that will not only entertain, but instruct the people, that will not be confined to the elite and the educated, but will be available to the masses, and that will not depict just war and love, but will present certain ideals before the people. These poets worked at different places, wrote in different languages and had hardly any knowledge of one another's activities. Yet they all strove to achieve a common goal. They employed the living speeches of the people

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which lacked a distinguished literary tradition of their own. The motivations of such transactions and transcreations and commentaries were to uphold the traditional socio-religious values, to revitalize the moral norms of society, now against the degrading religious practices and now to consolidate the Hindu community to meet a possible challenge from the ruling Muslims, and now to expound the theories of ideals of kings and the state. The literature produced in this process was not identical with the texts of the source languages. The *Rāmāyaṇa,* in particular, underwent a great change, both in spirit and in structure, and the changes were brought about deliberately. The poets changed the secular hero into a divine hero, discarded several episodes of the original and incorporated new material, grafted many local legends into the main body and transformed the spirit of an ancient heroic poem to achieve a new emotional intensity.

The apotheosis of the epic characters in the medieval period presents a sharp contrast to the attempts of identifying the epic heroes with the patrons of the poets adhering to the classical traditions. Pampa identified Arikeshari, a Chalukya king, with Arjuna in his *Vikramārjunavijayam,* or Ponna identified the Rashtrakuta king, Krishna II with Rama in his *Bhuvanaikarāmābhyudaya.* Sandhyakara Nandi, a court poet of Rampal, constructed his *Rāmacarita* in such a manner that it could be read as the story of the epic hero Rāma as well as of his patron. The medieval poet, in his anxiety to be with the people, found that the apotheosis of Rama was a much better way than to present him as a mortal king. The idea of incarnation was, of course, a part of

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popular religion and the presentation of Rama as an incarnation of God fulfilled the emotional need of the people for a personal God as well. Moreover, the apotheosis did not prevent the poets from presenting Rāma in familiar human situations and from subjecting him to human failings and sufferings. The eulogy of Rāma as the ideal king was also a concealed attempt to criticize the despots who were often a part of the contemporary experience.

Some of these poets used the new epical genres to defend the Brahmanical order. Tulsi, for example, defended and justified all actions of Rāma, some of which were certainly objectionable by any ethical standard. In fact his ill-famous couplet : *ḍhol gãwar śūdra paśu nārī / sakala tāḍaṇa ke adhikārī* — which upholds the existing inequality, and his occasional misogynic expressions, his great poetic power notwithstanding, makes his poem conspicuous as a manifesto of authoritarian Brahmanism. However, such features of these poems should not make one oblivious of their social role, and one should not dismiss them straightaway as a literature against peoples' legitimate questions about the existing social order.

The most important thing that was achieved through these adaptations and translations was narrowing the gap between the educated elite and non-literate mass. The people welcomed these poems not simply because of their ethical content —that was undoubtedly important and people could derive certain norms of social behaviour — but primarily for their beauty and vigour and variety. They recognized in the archetypes presented in these narrations people around them, and their relevance to understanding

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contemporary social reality. That explains why this literature exerted a tremendous influence on the people not only in their literary activities but on the social and moral activities as well. And this was precisely the intention of the medieval poet. All other things proved to be of little consequence.

Before we talk about the other streams of medieval Indian literature, a few words must be said about a socio-religious phenomenon which distinguished the medieval period. It was the emergence of a new religious emotion — *Bhakti,* generally translated as 'devotion'. It was passionate upsurge of emotional longing for a personal god leading to a total resignation. Scholars have tried to explain its sudden emergence all over the country by relating it to the advent of Islam in India, and more often to the oppression of the established religions over the common man. Such attempts explain the phenomenon only partially. *Bhakti* emerged in certain parts of the country long before the advent of Islamic mysticism on the Indian soil. It cannot be explained as a way of escape from the reality either for the Hindus who developed, according to some scholars, a sense of defeatism soon after the rise of Muslim power in India. *Bhakti* was always an essential component in the popular religions, it disregarded all kinds of intellectualism and rigours of rituals and elaborations of dogmas. It emerged as a religion of protest against the authoritarian and institutionalized religions, against scholasticism and priestly authority supported by the ruling power. It advocated the worship of a personal god as against the transcendental. The personal god fulfilled the emotional

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need of the people as he represented the cosmic power and yet appeared in a familiar form and familiar situations, as a friend, as a child, as a mother and also as a lover. *Bhakti* was an instrument to humanize a god and to relate him to all possible human situations.

It is not a coincidence that a large number of medieval poets were devotees and saints, and almost all the saints of that period were either poets or lovers of poetry. The saints who revolted against the established religions often used poetry as a medium of their communication and the poets invariably welcomed *bhakti* as a medium also of their communication. Some of the poet-saints came from the higher strata of society but a larger number from the lower. The factor that united them was *bhakti.*

A popular literature, in the sense I have defined it, grew in two ways. Some scholars and poets created a literature for the people which is represented in the translations and transcreations and thus maintained its affiliations with certain traditions of the past. The other way in which this literature grew was developed by the people themselves. A popular literature cannot thrive on the patronage alone of those who do not belong to the masses. It must have a popular support as well so that it can develop from within. The patronage available to the medieval poet often created a tension between his conviction and the demands of his patron. There is a legend that the fifteenth century Telugu poet, Bammera Potana, who translated the *Bhāgavata,* was asked by his patron, a king, to dedicate the work to him . He did not obey the king, instead he wrote a verse denouncing him and dedicating the work to God, the King

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of kings. The authenticity of his verse has been questioned by scholars, but the fact remains that this verse is an indication (whoever might have written it) of a tension common among medieval poets working under royal patronage. Similarly the twelve century Kannada poet Harihara, who once enjoyed patronage of a Hoyseala king, left the court and preferred living in a temple at Hampai. In one his verses he says :

If the king says, 'Go away', one has to obey him,
If the king says, 'Come', one has to present himself
before him and to wait for his order.

If the king says, 'shut up', one has to keep quiet,
his legs trembling and his head bent —

From these ignominies of life
I have freed myself for your favour
Oh, the King of Hampai, Śiva.

This verse again is an indication of the critical attitude prevalent among the poets to the existing system of patronage. The poet had to make a choice, whether to serve a mortal king of a particular place and only of a particular time, or to serve the king who is immortal and all pervasive.

kabīr kutā rāmkā mutiyā merā nā̃u
galai rāmkī jewadi jit khā̃ice tit jāu
(Kabir is Ram's dog, Mutiya is my name
Chain of Ram is around my neck, to whichever
direction am I pulled, I go)

Kabir touches this problem of patronage through the image of a loyal dog. He makes a choice between the earthly

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king and Rāma. The moment the poet discards the royal patronage, he looks towards temples or religious groups, and eventually to the people for an alternative.

I am not suggesting that patronage of the kings and landlords was necessarily rejected by all poets. On the contrary, a considerable part of medieval poetry was produced under their patronage. But whenever the poets rejected the royal patronage they were sustained by the people's patronage. And the majority of saints preferred the latter.

Medieval poetry, apart from the narrative, presents a wide variety of short verse forms, some didactic, some prayers and hymns, some exposition of religious doctrines and some intensely lyrical. Almost all of them were associated with organized movements of the people protesting against the established religious traditions. Either they originated as a part of the movement initiated by different religious organizations or individual saints, or they became a part of the literature sanctioned by them. The poet had two alternatives : either to find a landlord who would support him or to join a religious group. Each of these groups- whether the Alwars and the Nayanmars of Tamilnadu or the Virasaivas of Karnataka, or the followers of Chaitanya in Bengal, of Guru Nanak and Kabir and Tulsidas in north India or the *Barakaris* of Maharashtra-produced, or helped the growth, or a literature which was primarily an instrument of the propagation of their ideals as well as an attempt to create new myths and symbols. The literature that flourished under the inspiration of these

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religious groups was by and large a literature of the people and to some extent by the people. Many of the poets and saints belonged to the lower strata of society and experimented with the themes and forms and metrical structures that existed in oral literature. The metaphors and imagery employed by them came directly from their occupational experience as well as from the real-life situations which created a sharp contrast with the poetic conventions inherited from the Sanskritic traditions. Among the poet-saints one notices the presence of Ravidas, a cobbler; Kabir, a weaver; Sena, a barber; Namadev, a tailor; Sadna, a butcher ; Dadu, a carder. The Virasaivas included people from various professions and callings — barbers, washermen, weavers, performers, basketmakers and even a prostitute. So did almost all the religious sects. It is but natural that poets representing such different professions would change the texture of poetry and present an entirely new experience.

Medieval literature, then, evolved out of two distinct processes : one, the process of vernacularization manifested in the translations and adaptations of Sanskrit epics and commentaries on religious texts ; two, a process of 'super-ordination' by which I mean giving a new prestige to the existing themes, structures and forms current among the people in different regions.

The poet had to operate within a religious framework because that gave him maximum freedom and opportunity to express his own social concerns and to experiment with the literary medium. If the religious leaders used literature as an instrument of propagation of their ideas, the poets

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too used religion as an instrument of propagation of literature. Since most of the poets were also religious men, the contradiction involved in the operation was easily resolved. It did create a tension only when the poet was not a religious man. The poet, however, willingly accepted a religious framework, as he found it flexible enough to accommodate all his concerns, social, moral as well as personal, without making a fetish of distinguishing between the sacred and the secular. The two streams of *Bhakti, nirguṇa* (without qualities) and *saguṇa* (with qualities), provided two different frameworks for poetry. The *saguṇa* framework allowed the poet to deal with the god-man relation within a domestic environment and with love in all its manifestations : friendship, filial affection and devotion, and amorousness. The *nirguṇa* framework, on the other hand, gave a greater scope to dealing with the immediate social concerns. While the former developed an elaborate mythology of divine sports (*līlā*) in human terms, the latter concentrated on the sufferings of the people caused by social injustice and religious evils. This is undoubtedly a simplified description of a complex situation, and strictly from the literary point of view the two frameworks often overlapped. But it is sufficient to point out that the religious framework of medieval poetry provided an ample measure of freedom to individual creativity and a greater opportunity of communication. Instead of encouraging an escapist literature restricted to a few, it ensured a great participation of the people.

III

In a society divided into a literate and a non-literate

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group, a written literature is necessarily confined to the former. Medieval Indian literature, I repeat, was created for the people, but it was primarily a written literature. In order to resolve this contradiction the poets adopted an oral medium as its mode of transmission. Not only did the poets themselves recite and chant their poems, but a class of performers emerged all over the country who made the written literature available to the non-literate audiences. They hardly cared for the purity of the verbal art, took help from the other arts, music and dance, and often dramatic techniques. Or, in other words, they did not depend on the pure modes of communication, the written or the spoken word, but on the hybridization of media. The practice of reading out of literature was, of course, not an exclusive phenomenon of medieval India. The ancient Indian poets also read out their verses, as did the Greeks and the Romans. But they read before a chosen group. Erich Auerbach has shown admirably how the literary public of Rome lost its contact with the lower classes and failed to survive. The medieval Indian poet realized that a literature must be in constant touch with the living language of the people and it must be continuously related with the changing experience of the people. This is one of the reasons why his texts are so much disputed and interpolations in them are so much common. Each text bears the testimony of changes in them caused by the poets and the performers to suit the need of the people.

Along with the modes of oral transmission adopted by the poets, one must also consider the role of seasonal festivals and fairs in the life of the non-literate masses and

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how the poets took advantage of those. It was the desire on the part of the saint-poets to maintain constant touch with the people that prompted them to participate in different festivals and to visit places. The Alwars and the Nayanmars would move from temple to temple, so would the Barakaris of Maharashtra. The Virasaivas had their *Śivānubhava maṇḍapa* where thousands of devotees would meet, Sankaradeva introduced the *Nāmghar (*home of praise) and Chaitanya arranged the *nagar saṁkīrtana* (religious processions) and Jagannath Das established *bhāgavata tuṅgī* (places where the *Bhāgavata* is recited*)* in every village in Orissa. Songs could be sung in the temples as well as in the holy places specially created by the poets and the people. Long narative poems could be read throughout the festival days. These were the devices made by the medieval poet with the help of the people. The religious framework, thus, was as must a necessity for the poet, as the artistic activities were to the religious leader.

The situation has a certain similarity with that of Protestant Europe during the Reformation which not only encouraged the best minds of Europe to write in vernaculars, but employed every form of art in the service of its propaganda. It encouraged the growth of a dramatic literature out of its liturgical and folkloristic origins, as did medieval India witness the growth of religious dramatic performances in the form of *Rāmalīlā* and *Kriṣhṇalīlā.* Fulminations against the caste system and idolatry and empty rituals by Kabir, Nanak, Basavanna, Vemana, Tukaram and Ramprasad, to name a few, can be favourably compared with the angry protests against the vendors of

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indulgence and false promises of security of salvation during the Reformation movement. The comparison, however, cannot be pushed further, nor is it necessary either. The Protestant movement upheld the importance of the Bible, the one and the only one text, to examine the validity of all religious dogmas. The medieval Indian saints had little faith in any particular text, and many of them found all texts useless. While Luther and his followers aroused the peasantry through fiery polemics and engaged in a series of theological debates, the medieval Indian poets had little interest in theological niceties, though theological rigours were imposed upon each sect later. The medieval poet-saint did organize the people to some extent, but certainly not to the extent of mobilizing them either against the ruling power or for a radical change in the social order. Except for the community of the Sikhs, which continued as a distinct group in the following centuries, most of the sects soon lost their potentiality. But I need not go into that story at present. What is important is the poet's partial success in creating a new awareness among the people. He challenged the apparent rationality of the causal relation between the idea of *karma* and the birth-cycle which gave the caste system its legitimacy. The doctrine of *kāyakave kailās* (work is God) of the Virasaivas gave a new dignity to all kinds of labour, and several saint-poets, Kabir, Nanak, Vemana and Tukaram in particular, repudiated the caste system in the strongest terms, upholding the natural equality of man. Sankaradeva in one of his verses lists the names of different groups of people, most of them are tribals, the *Kīrātas*, the *Kachāris*, the *Khāsīs*, the *Gāros*, the *Miris*, the *Kaṅkas* etc, who remained outside the pale of Hinduism, to declare their

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dignity as human beings.

Kirāta Kachārī Khāsī gāro miri
yavana kaṅka gowāla
dhovāje turuka asama muluka
kuvāca mlechha caṇḍāla

His idea of *bhakti* was to unify people whom the Hindu elite has denied all privileges for centuries. His verse anticipates, as it were, a programme of 'national intergration'. But this is not a political programme, it is only a manifestation of his serious concern for human beings. And because of that he includes in his list of groups of people -the *Yavanas* and the *Turukas* i.e. the Muslims as well. His was the idea of a plural society. Without committing too much, one can say that the essence of bhakti literature is an Indian equivalent of European humanism. But this 'humanism' flourished within a religious framework. If that appears to be a contradiction in terms, one should ask oneself how a deeply religious Greek poet could declare, "There are many wonders in the world, but none is more wonderful than man", and whether we can dismiss Chandidas' utterance "Man is the highest and there is nothing higher than him" as a later interpolation.

IV

The story of the emergence and the consolidation of a popular literature in medieval India would remain incomplete without a reference to its relation with the traditional literary conventions. Often in a study of literature

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in isolation from social reality the stress is laid mainly, if not entirely, on the content with an expectation to find direct correspondence between the two, and the form is neglected as something arbitrary or of little consequence. But literary form, very much like the content, is related to the complex creative process and takes a concrete shape through the interactions between the artist and the world to which he belongs. His choice of the linguistic material and the concretization of his expression through a particular structure is often determined by extra-literary facts, though it is not easy to describe their relations. Sociological criticism can be useful in understanding the nature of an artistic work only when it treats the work not merely as a quarry of useful data about a particular society, but as a distinct human activity.

The very employment of vernaculars rejecting Sanskrit, for example, was a necessity for the medieval poet. It was necessary not only because it provided the closest approximation to the people, a necessary condition for the growth of a popular literature, but also because it proved to be the adequate medium for his emotion. Sanskrit was still in use in the medieval period and a substantial amount of literature was still written in that language. But the vernaculars opened a new possibility. Sanskrit, being nobody's mother tongue, an imposed language of education and communication among the elite, was very much like English in modern India. Moreover, it lacked symbols and imagery, as pointed out by D. H. Ingalls, derived from the impressions of childhood or emotions which form our characters in early childhood. It was divorced from an area

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of life whence poetry derives much of its strength. It became possible for the medieval poet to create a poetry which incorporated imagery and metaphors derived from the experiences of childhood and adolescence on the one hand, and of the domestic surroundings and the daily activities of the artisans and labourers and of various occupational groups. Almost no studies have been done in this area. To give an instance, even a cursory glance at the Sakhis of Kabir would show that along with the traditional metaphors and symbols of trees and rivers and birds, appeared a distinctly new set of metaphors and imagery, all derived from familiar situations and experiences. It is a world distinguished by vividness and naturalness, created through the experiences of daily life : a market-place where cheats and pimps thrive, a dilapidated temple, a potter at work, a blacksmith busy with his tools, an oilman grinding seeds, a kazi killing an animal, a dog loafing around, a falcon swooping upon a bird, and so on. These are the materials with which the medieval poet created a world of his own. This world may or may not attract the modern man, but its uniqueness can be understood only in its own terms. The language he used, the conventions and devices he adopted, the metres and forms he employed are the necessary constituents of the world he created. A mere analysis of the content would not reveal the intensity of his experience and the complexities of his expression. The popular literature that was created by him had both.

The greatest singular achievement of the medieval Indian poet was the creation of a lyric form, which places the poet at the centre of the structure, but does not alienate

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him from the community. Indian religious traditions plead very strongly for the annihilation of ego and for total surrender of man to the authority of God. The medieval religious tradition did not oppose them. Religious poetry under such a situation would naturally strive for anonymity rather than pronounced individuality. But the poet's name or some kind of identification mark became an integral part of the medieval religious poems, and the poets made autobiographical references quite often. These references were made not in the form of historical facts, barring a few cases, but generally in the form of personal experiences and conflicts. In some cases they were uttered through a persona but in many cases directly in the person of the poet himself. And this made these poems truly popular. It accommodates the experience of the individual — his total experience of life — dedicated to God. There remained nothing in life which could not find a place in this structure. Even if you are against the very scheme of things, this structure allows scope for its full ventilation. Take for example these two quotations, one from Tukaram and the other from Ramprasad.

Well done, O God, I became bankrupt
Well done, the famine torments me
Well done, I am dishonoured today
Well done, I have lost my cattle and little that I had
... Tuka says, this vow of ekadasi is good
I can keep myself awake all the night in an empty stomach.

I shall not call you mother any longer
I had enough of humiliations.
Desperate as I was, I cried and cried
'Mother'

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But all my prayers fell on your deaf ears.
The child suffers in the very presence of his mother.
Why then, should he call you
Mother ?
What a paradox
Says Ramprasad,
Mother against son !
Now I will see
What more you can do
What more suffering
Can you inflict upon me
except
an empty stomach.

The poet is expressing a personal experience which is not different from the collective experience. The individuality of the expression gives it the distinction of a lyric, and the connection of the experience of the individual to that of the people makes it a part of the popular literature as conceived by the medieval Indian poet.

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Sisir Kumar Das was educated at Calcutta, London and Cornell Universities. A poet, playwright and literary critic, Professor Das has been acknowledged as one of the seminal minds of the contemporary world of Indian literature and culture. He has sought to create a body of aesthetic criticism and a new model of literary history incorporating in itself what is best in the culture of the past as well as the present. He was recipient of the Nehru Prize of the Federal Republic of Germany for his monograph *Western Sailors : Eastern Seas* (1969), the Tagore Memorial Prize of the West Bengal Government twice for his works *The Shadow of the Cross-Hinduism and Christianity in a Colonial Situation* (1974) and *The Artist in Chains — The Life of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee* (1984) and the Kamal Kumari National Award (1994). One of his plays *Bāgh*, has been translated into Assamese by Smt Mamoni Raisom Goswami. Currently Tagore Professor of Bengali and Comparative Literature at the University of Delhi, Dr. Das is also the author of two volumes of *A History of Indian Literature* published by the Sahitya Akademi

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